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The persuasive function of commissive speech acts in Mexican and Portuguese homiletic discourse

0. Introduction

Various aspects of religious discourse, including sermons¹, have been widely examined from a rhetorical perspective. Studies abound on the language of preaching and its techniques, in which theorists take the classical rhetoric approach and explain the rules of the proper discursive organization and correct oral expression of a sermon. Such manuals aim to provide instructions that will help perfect the art of preaching. However, although in recent years pragmalinguistic analysis and discourse analysis have been gaining interest as tools to study different types of discourse – especially political discourse – sermons have rarely been the object of pragmalinguistic studies.

A number of manuals on techniques of preaching can be mentioned, for example: Grzegorski (1999), Dziewiecki (2006), Aldazábal (2006), Biscontin (2007), Korolko (2010) or Peri (2013), among many others. There are also literary studies of sermons, such as that conducted by Korolko (1971). Additionally, sermons from previous centuries are frequently investigated, as in the interpretation of sermons from 13th/14th centuries proposed by Mika (2012) or the pragmalinguistic analysis of Evangelical 17th-century sermons carried out by Przymuszała (2003). Finally, worth mentioning are the studies by Álvarez Rosa (2010, 2012), in which the author provides a discursive analysis of contemporary homiletic discourse, and those by

¹ Although the typology of preaching genres treats sermon and homily as two different types, it is difficult to establish a clear boundary between them. The word *sermon* may be understood in a broader way, including the homily as one of its forms. In practice, both types of preaching are used by sermonizers and frequently it is difficult to tell them apart by their forms. Following Krok (2005), in order to provide more clarity and given that the nature of this study is not theological, the term *sermon* will be used in its broad sense that includes different kinds of preaching, including homilies. In addition, the *Catholic Dictionary* (2017) considers the terms *sermon* and *homily* as synonyms.

Zdunkiewicz-Jedynak (1994, 1996), Garpiel (2003) and Krok (2005), all of whom concentrate on the persuasive function of sermons.

This paper aims to analyze the persuasive function of homiletic discourse from a pragmalinguistic perspective, based on speech-act theory. The main purpose of the analysis is to examine the persuasive function of commissive speech acts in Mexican and Portuguese Catholic sermons, especially those that can acquire the form of conditional sentences.

In order to carry out this analysis, transcribed versions of twenty homilies delivered in Spanish in the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City between January 15 and September 02, 2012, and twenty homilies delivered in Portuguese in the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Fátima between May 30, 2010 and September 30, 2012 have been examined². Given that the aim of this study is to analyze contemporary sermons, the most recent texts at the moment of the corpus' collection have been selected. What is more, sermons pronounced by different orators have been chosen in order to ensure that the linguistic devices used in the texts are not proper of the idiolect of a single priest, but features typical for the discourse in question.

The article is organized as follows. Section 1 briefly describes persuasion in homiletic discourse. Section 2 underlines the importance of indirect speech acts. Since in sermons commissive speech acts are often used with the meaning of directives, if they are expressed directly, they may threaten the interlocutor's face. Section 3 focuses on commissive speech acts as exponents of the persuasive function. It highlights the deontic character of commissives and shows how these can be reformulated as conditional sentences. Furthermore, it provides a reflection on different types of conditional sentences and demonstrates that reformulations of commissives coming from the corpus can be interpreted as speech-act conditionals. Finally, section 4 presents the conclusions.

1. Persuasion in homiletic discourse

Persuasion is one of the principal functions of homiletic discourse. The preacher attempts to influence his hearers' behaviours and attitudes, and wants to convince them to live in accordance with the rules and values professed by Catholic Church. The aim of persuasion is not only the intellectual acceptance by the addressee of the ideas that are transmitted, but also

² The transcriptions are available on the former websites of both churches: <http://web.archive.org/web/20120414085755/http://www.virgendeguadalupe.org.mx/Homilias.htm> and <https://web.archive.org/web/20150107090808/http://www.santuario-fatima.pt/portal/index.php?id=41998>.

their willingness to act according to those ideas. Relevant argumentation in only one of the aspects of persuasion. Of the utmost importance is also the selection of linguistic devices that will create suitable emotional environment (Zdunkiewicz-Jedynak 1996: 18). In this emotional environment the persuasive and the integrative functions are joined. The preacher's words have more influence on believers' attitudes when they feel they are members of the same community, and when the preacher also shows himself to be a member of this group. Such a position of the sermonizer attracts the hearers' attention and makes the sermon have a stronger impact upon them. For this reason, the preacher avoids using direct directive or commissive speech acts and prefers to use indirect speech acts.

The specificity of sermons consists in the fact that its addressees voluntarily submit to persuasion. What is more, in sermons the aim is not to radically change the hearers' beliefs or opinions, but rather to constantly justify the religion's moral requirements and to strengthen the behavioural rules previously accepted by the believers. Additionally, the listeners concede the preacher's authority (Zdunkiewicz-Jedynak 1996: 26, 36).

Searle (1979/81: 14–15), in his taxonomy of speech acts, defines commissive speech acts as those illocutionary acts whose purpose is to commit the speaker, in varying degrees, to doing something in the future. These include promises, warnings and threats³. It should be mentioned that in the studied corpus not only directive speech acts (such as orders or requests), but also commissive speech acts (promises, warnings or threats) are used in order to elicit certain behaviours and attitudes from the hearers (that is, to accomplish a specific intended perlocutionary effect); thus, they are considered exponents of the persuasive function.

2. Indirect directive and commissive speech acts

The character of the analyzed sermons is clearly deontic. The two principal exponents of deontic modality are directive and commissive speech acts, and both abound in the corpus. In order to encourage, persuade or motivate believers to act in the way expected, the preacher uses various linguistic devices, especially directive acts, such as orders, requests or recommendations. However, commissives are also frequently used with a similar purpose; by promising the hearers some reward or by warning them against the negative consequences of their behaviour, the priest influences them to obey the Church's guidelines.

³ Some scholars consider warnings and threats as directive speech acts (Pytel-Pandey 2013: 96). However, in this study Searle's classification will be followed.

It should be noted that in homiletic discourse indirect directive and commissive speech acts prevail. As highlighted by Searle (1979/1981: 30), speakers frequently mean not only what they say, but also something more. Indirect speech acts are cases in which one illocutionary act is performed indirectly by performing another.

Directive speech acts impose a requirement on the hearer's behaviour, which causes them to be face-threatening acts (see Brown & Levinson (1978/1987)). Taking into account principles of politeness, direct directive acts are produced relatively rarely and usually, in most communicative situations, speakers use various mechanisms to reduce the threat to the interlocutor's face (Murcia-Bielsa 2000: 125). The same is true of commissive speech acts – since in the analyzed texts they are used with a persuasive aim (and may be interpreted as directives), if they were direct, they could sound impolite. The priest could give the impression that he wants to forcibly impose his point of view. For example, it is much more polite to say *If we want to gain eternal life, we should take communion* than *I warn you that you won't have eternal life if you don't take communion*. For this reason, in the examined homilies most commissive speech acts are indirect. Supposing that the cooperative principle (Grice 1976) is respected, their implicatures are easily understood.

3. Commissive speech acts

Commissive speech acts are characterized by the speaker assuming a commitment or an obligation, and they include such acts as promises, warnings or threats. Both promises and warnings and threats share the same features (Searle 1969/1970: 58; Sami 2015). In all these acts speakers usually commit themselves to take a specific action in the future (although not always; for example, in a threat such as *Put on a coat because, if you don't, you'll be cold*, it will not be the speaker who will cause the cold). However, a promise is made for the benefit of the hearer, whereas a threat implies some harm. Searle (1969/1970: 58) distinguishes a promise from a threat in the following way:

One crucial distinction between promises on the one hand and threats on the other is that a promise is a pledge to do something for you, not to you; but a threat is a pledge to do something to you, not for you. A promise is defective if the thing promised is something the promisee does not want done [...].

The means used to influence the believers' attitude or behaviour may acquire different pragmatic values, from requests, advice and demands,

through appeals, to warnings. An explicit warning (or rather, a threat) appears in the whole corpus only once and, in addition, it is presented as coming from Jesus:

- 1) No Evangelho proclamado escutámos a advertência de Jesus: “Se não vos converterdes e não vos tornardes como crianças, não entrareis no reino dos Céus”. (16/07/2011)⁴

In the proclaimed Gospel we have heard Jesus’ warning: “If you don’t convert, you will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven”.

In homiletic discourse the most common type of commissive is indirect. What particularly stands out is the usage of conditionals: the preacher describes the condition that should be met in order to gain a benefit (happiness, eternal life, etc.). On the one hand, it may be treated as a promise: if the believers meet the necessary requirements, they will receive a reward. Nevertheless, on the other hand, if they do not abide by the Christian rules, they will be punished. Such a perspective shows that the following examples may be interpreted as warnings or threats. The warning is not uttered in a direct way, but it is implied:

- 2) Lo debemos entender así: **si no nos alimentamos, nos morimos**, lo mismo sucede espiritualmente en el camino a nuestra salvación; si no tomamos, **si no comulgamos**, si no comemos como dijo Jesús su Cuerpo y su Sangre **vamos a morir**, no vamos a tener salvación. (7/06/2012)

We should understand it this way: if we don’t eat, we die; the same happens spiritually on the way to our salvation; if we don’t take communion, if we don’t eat, as Jesus said, his Body and his Blood, we will die, we will not have salvation.

- 3) A humanidade não foi criada para servir os mercados; estes é que foram criados para servir a humanidade. **Se este princípio for respeitado, a esperança vencerá o medo**. (31/12/2011)

Humanity was not created to serve markets; these were created to serve humanity. If this principle is respected, hope will overcome fear.

Case (2) is clearly a warning (or even a threat): *If we don’t take communion, we will die*. This warning has at the same time a strong persuasive character: the listeners of the sermon, given that they probably do not want to die, must take communion. Example (3) can be read as a promise: *If we do respect this principle, hope will overcome fear*. On the other hand: *If we do not respect it, fear will not be overcome*.

⁴ In brackets, the date of the sermon from which the example comes is provided.

Besides conditional sentences, homiletic discourse features other ways of expressing a condition necessary to obtain a benefit. Words such as *condition* do not oblige directly, but they show the relationships between different phenomena and, this way, they perform persuasive function. The addressees of a sermon, when they hear that the condition for entering Heaven is conversion, will want to convert (example (4a)). All the following examples talk, in different ways, about the conditions that must be fulfilled and whose lack of fulfillment will bring negative consequences for believers. Examples (4a) – (7c) can be reformulated as advice, warnings or threats⁵ addressed to the faithful (fragments taken from the corpus are marked with *a*, reformulations are marked as *b* and *c*, and will be commented on below).

4a) En el Evangelio Jesús también pide la conversión como condición para entrar en el Reino de Dios. (22/01/2012)

In the Gospel Jesus also asks for conversion as a condition for entering the Kingdom of God.

4b) “Si (ustedes) no se convierten, no entrarán en el Reino de Dios.”

“If you don’t convert, you will not enter the Kingdom of God.”

4c) “Si quieren entrar en el Reino de Dios, conviértanse.”

“If you want to enter the Kingdom of God, convert.”

5a) Pongamos los ojos en Jesús, porque Él es la luz de los hombres, es camino verdad y vida, y nos espera en su gloria, pero después de que hayamos cumplido con la misión que Él nos confió de ser sus testigos haciendo el bien. (20/05/2012)

Let us look toward Jesus, because He is the light of men, He is the way, the truth and the life, and He awaits us in His glory, but only after we have fulfilled the mission He entrusted us with to be His witnesses doing good.

5b) “Si (ustedes) no cumplen con la misión que Jesús les confió, Él no los recibirá en su gloria.”

“If you don’t fulfill the mission that Jesus entrusted you, He will not receive you in His glory.”

⁵ Grzegorzycowa (1995: 145), while discussing imperative utterances, describes the differences between advice, warnings and threats. According to this author, in the case of advice, the speaker believes that it is the addressee who is interested in the state of affairs mentioned in the proposition occurring. At the same time, nothing is imposed on the addressee. A warning is similar to advice, with the difference that it indicates imminent danger. Finally, a threat contains information about the sanction that will be imposed in case that the hearer does not fulfill the order expressed in the utterance.

- 5c) “Si quieren ser recibidos por Jesús en su gloria, cumplan con la misión que Él les confió.”
“If you want to be received by Jesus in His glory, fulfill the mission that He entrusted you with.”
- 6a) Mas este conhecimento não é possível sem humildade e simplicidade de coração, porque só a estes – os simples e os humildes – é que o Senhor se revela [...] (17/07/2010)
But this knowledge is not possible without humility and simplicity of heart, because it is only to these – the simple and the humble – that the Lord reveals Himself.
- 6b) “Se não tiverem um coração humilde e simples, o Senhor não se lhes revelará.”
“If you don’t have a humble and simple heart, the Lord will not reveal Himself to you.”
- 6c) “Se querem que o Senhor se lhes revele, tenham um coração humilde e simples.”
“If you want the Lord to reveal Himself to you, have a humble and simple heart.”
- 7a) A lógica do amor, da simplicidade e da humildade, do «tornar-se criança» é o caminho que o Senhor propõe a todos aqueles que desejam aceder ao reino dos Céus, à salvação. (16/07/2011)
The logic of love, of simplicity and humility, of “becoming a child”, is the way that the Lord proposes to all those who wish to gain access to the Kingdom of Heaven, to salvation.
- 7b) “Se não for aceite a lógica do amor, da simplicidade e da humildade, não se acederá ao Reino dos Céus.”
“If the logic of love, of simplicity and humility is not accepted, one will not gain access to the Kingdom of Heaven.”
- 7c) “Se querem aceder ao Reino dos Céus, aceitem a lógica do amor, da simplicidade e da humildade.”
“If you want to gain access to the Kingdom of Heaven, accept the logic of love, of simplicity and humility.”

Noteworthy is the fact that these commissive speech acts have at the same time a directive character (note the imperatives *conviértanse* – “convert”, *cumplan con la misión* – “fulfill the mission”, *aceitem a lógica do amor* – “accept the logic of love”). For this reason, some scholars consider threats or warnings to be directive speech acts (Pytel-Pandey 2013: 96).

Schwenter (1999/2013) highlights that conditional protasis markers (for example *si / se* – “if”) may not only be hypothetical or counterfactual (unreal), but also factual (real). Frequently, it is considered that semantically *si* introduces a hypothesis, something uncertain from the speaker’s point of view (for example, in *If it’s raining, I won’t go out*, the speaker does not know if it is or if it will be raining) or something unreal (as in *If it had been raining, I wouldn’t have gone out*). However, in some cases the propositional content of conditional protases may be known, factual. For example, in *It’s raining. If it’s raining, I’m not going out* the speaker knows that it is raining thanks to the context given by the previous assertion. Thus, Schwenter (1999/2013: 4) argues that

The “hypotheticality” or “uncertainty” often attributed to conditional markers (in conditional constructions) is not in fact part of their coded semantics, but is instead more strictly pragmatic, and specifically imputable to a generalized conversational implicature that can be canceled in context.

Conditional protases introduced by *si* (“if”) in certain contexts may have a factual meaning. There is no discrepancy between the inherent semantics of conditional protases introduced by such markers and the factual context of the utterance (Schwenter, 1999/2013: 4). The author concludes that the hypothetical character (or the one of speaker’s uncertainty) is an implicature that is linked to the conditional marker. Conditional sentences are used mainly to make hypotheses about possible situations. Such hypotheses (introduced by the conditional marked in the protasis) are based on uncertainty regarding their fulfillment. If the implicatures of the uncertainty do not occur, interlocutors consider that the situation introduced by *si* (“if”) is real and not hypothetical. Also Nkollo (2016: 473–474) underlines that the recognition of the exact value of a marker traditionally labelled as “conditional” (or “concessive”, “temporal”, etc.) depends also (or primarily) on contextual factors that are likely to bring out some of its interpretations and discard the others. Functional changes can usually be considered the result of the process called *entrenchment*, in which conversational implicatures and rhetorical strategies become conventionalized: they begin to be part of the encoded (not inferred) meaning of the marker in question. Nkollo (2016: 474) concludes that “the readiness of conditional markers to undergo functional changes can be attributed to the bipartite structure of conditional sentences”: speakers frequently redefine the relationship between the protasis and the apodosis in various ways.

The traditional classification of conditional sentences in Romance languages distinguishes between real (factual), potential (hypothetical) and

unreal (counterfactual) conditionals. Such a classification is based on the morphology of the verb forms employed in the protasis and the apodosis, but does not take the context into account. Sweetser (1990/1998 *apud* Schwenter 1999/2013: 13) proposes a classification focused rather on the relationship that is produced between the proposition in the protasis and the one in the apodosis. The author distinguishes three types of conditionals: content conditionals, epistemic conditionals and speech-act conditionals.

In content conditionals, the speaker makes a prediction about the external world and the protasis postulates a situation (for example *If it rains, they'll cancel the match*). As far as epistemic conditionals are concerned, the speaker draws an inference in the apodosis, while the protasis provides the basis for the inference (for example *If they are not picking up their mail, they've gone on holidays*). Knowledge of the content of the protasis allows the speaker draw an inference and conclude that the content of the apodosis is true. Finally, regarding speech-act conditionals, the speaker performs a speech act conditionally in the apodosis, while the protasis makes the speech act relevant. The performance of the speech act is conditioned by the state of affairs mentioned in the protasis. The situation described in the protasis allows or causes the speech act that follows (Sweetser 1990/1998: 118). In order for the speech act reflected in the apodosis to be performed, the condition presented in the protasis must be fulfilled (for example *If you get bored, come see me at work*) (examples by Schwenter 1999/2013: 13–14). It should be noted that speech-act conditionals allow imperatives in the apodosis.

Fragments (2) – (3) and the reformulations marked as *b* in examples (4a) – (7c) can be interpreted as content conditionals (they show a causal relationship between the situation mentioned in the protasis and the situation mentioned in the apodosis) or as speech-act conditionals. Furthermore, paraphrases labelled as *c* in examples (4a) – (7c) are examples of speech-act conditionals.

While content conditionals do not correspond to factual propositions, epistemic and speech-act conditionals usually do. The factual protasis in speech-act conditionals is the reason for which the action expressed in the speech act in question should be performed. For example, if the faithful want the Lord to reveal Himself to them, they must have a humble and simple heart (case (6c)).

The meaning of conditionals depends on the discourse in which they appear. Additionally, speech-act conditionals often contain protases whose content is already known and in this way they show that the speech act in the apodosis corresponds to the current discursive situation. In homiletic discourse the preacher often employs protases whose propositional content is

considered to be already known. For example, in the discursive context of preaching it is obvious that the addressees of the sermon want to enter the Kingdom of God, as in the example (4c) and, given that they do, they have to perform the action required by the directive act expressed in the apodosis (in this case, to convert). Both the priest and the believers consider the protasis factual. The same occurs in the other examples labelled as *c* in (4a) – (7c).

Examples (4a) – (7c) demonstrate how commissive speech acts may acquire the form of conditional sentences. In addition, they show just how thin the border between commissive and directive speech acts is, since warnings observed in the analyzed sermons often imply an order or, at least a suggestion about the behaviour that is expected from the faithful.

4. Conclusions

The character of the analyzed sermons is clearly persuasive. The preacher tries to influence his hearers' behaviours and attitudes using multiple linguistic devices, one of which are commissive speech acts. Given that in the homiletic discourse commissive speech acts usually have a deontic character, and are used with the same purpose as directives (that is, they impose a requirement on the hearer's behaviour), they constitute face-threatening acts. In order to be more polite, and gain the audience's trust and attention, the priest uses indirect commissives.

The most common way of expressing commissive speech acts in the corpus analyzed is through conditionals: the preacher describes the condition that should be met in order for the faithful to gain a benefit (e.g. salvation). On the one hand, such speech acts may be treated as promises; on the other, they may be interpreted as warnings or threats.

Commissive speech acts, especially those that acquire the form of conditionals, are a powerful persuasive resource. By showing the reward (in promises), they induce the hearer to fulfill the necessary condition. By talking about the negative consequences in case that the condition is not met (in warnings and threats), they also encourage the hearer to abide by the rules professed by the Church.

The commissive speech acts that appear in sermons can often be reformulated as speech-act conditionals, in which the speaker performs a speech act conditionally in the apodosis, while the protasis makes the speech act relevant: the situation described in the protasis allows or causes the speech act that follows. The content of the protasis is already known, it is considered as factual by both the preacher and his hearers, and so the fulfillment of the condition presented in the apodosis seems impossible to reject.

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SUMMARY

This paper aims to analyze the persuasive function of homiletic discourse from a pragmalinguistic perspective, based on speech-act theory. The main purpose of the analysis is to examine the persuasive function of commissive speech acts in Mexican and Portuguese Catholic sermons, especially those that can acquire the form of conditional sentences. The article is organized as follows. Section 1 briefly describes persuasion in homiletic discourse. Section 2 underlines the importance of indirect speech acts. Since in sermons commissive speech acts are often used with the meaning of directives, if they are expressed directly, they may threaten the interlocutor's face. Section 3 focuses on commissive speech acts as exponents of the persuasive function. It highlights the deontic character of commissives and shows how these can be reformulated as conditional sentences. Furthermore, it provides a reflection on different types of conditional sentences and demonstrates that reformulations of commissives coming from the corpus can be interpreted as speech-act conditionals. Finally, section 4 presents the conclusions.

Key words: pragmalinguistics, commissive speech acts, persuasive function, conditional sentences, homiletic discourse.

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Małgorzata Wielgosz zajmuje się językoznawstwem hiszpańskim i portugalskim. Obrona jej rozprawy doktorskiej z zakresu pragmalingwistyki planowana jest na wrzesień 2017 roku. W 2011 roku otrzymała Medal UAM „za wybitne osiągnięcia w nauce i wyróżniający udział w życiu Uniwersytetu”. Publikuje w czasopismach polskich i zagranicznych, m.in. w redagowanym w Stanach Zjednoczonych i indeksowanym w wykazie Thomson & Reuters („lista filadelfijska”) periodyku *Romance Philology* (we współautorstwie z dr. hab. Mikołajem Nkollo). Wystąpiła na wielu konferencjach, m.in. na VII. *Internationale Arbeitstagung: Romanisch-deutscher und innerromanischer Sprachvergleich* w Innsbrucku. W 2017 roku wygłosiła wykład w Niemczech na zaproszenie Europa-Universität Viadrina we Frankfurcie nad Odrą.
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