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The Religious Lexicon Embedded in Public American Curricula

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The Religious Lexicon Embedded in Public American Curricula

Abstract

What is the relationship between one's own religious beliefs and their everyday colloquial diction choices? Moreover, why is the subfield that encompasses the intersection of sociolinguistics, education, and religious studies one that has gained little scholarly interest in recent years, where one could argue the importance of religious belief, and other socio-political beliefs in education have come center stage in the heart of American political debate? This article will tackle this broad range of topics through a case study focusing on my primary research question: How does a teacher's own religious identity affect the religious language utilized in their classroom assignments and materials? And moreover, what is the possible impact this has on the religious majority and non-majority identifying students? This study utilizes a primary data-set consisting of three focus groups, each conducted with the partnership of C. Hunter Ritchie (CHR) Elementary School, located in Fauquier County, Virginia. In turn, there is heavy emphasis on sentiment analysis and basic statistical analysis of a collection of both in-class and homework materials provided by each grade level within CHR. This religious studies project is conducted utilizing a strong emphasis on grounded applied linguistic and sociolinguistic methodologies coupled with religious studies theories, discussed throughout the article. With the coupling of statistical and sentiment analysis of focus group transcriptions, along with qualitative primary datasets collected from the focus groups, I analyze and observe how the teachers' general lexicon utilized with their colleagues and within the classroom, is in part, a product of both their own religious background along with the popular religion of the school district itself. I use this in order to herein provide a grounded hypothesis of how this might affect levels of subject-matter retention, focus, and senses of inclusivity and belonging, in Christian and non-Christian students. This project provides further grounding for the continuation of this study, and for the argumentation of effective research methods that can be used to intertwine methodologies of both sociolinguistics and religious studies into the future. In turn, it is my hope that with this grounding, there is now the space for furthering in-depth scholarship focused on the relationship between religious identity, and personal, colloquial, and professional lexicon creations.

Keywords

religion, religious identity, Christianity, sentiment analysis, sociolinguistics

Disciplines

Applied Linguistics | Educational Sociology | Elementary Education | Religion | Sociology of Religion

Comments

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The Religious Lexicon Embedded in Public American Curricula

A Study of the Relationship Between Religious Identity and Lexical Choice in the Classroom

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ABSTRACT

What is the relationship between one's own religious beliefs and their everyday colloquial diction choices? Moreover, why is the subfield that encompasses the intersection of sociolinguistics, education, and religious studies one that has gained little scholarly interest in recent years, where one could argue the importance of religious belief, and other socio-political beliefs in education have come center stage in the heart of American political debate? This article will tackle this broad range of topics through a case study focusing on my primary research question: *How does a teacher's own religious identity affect the religious language utilized in their classroom assignments and materials?* And moreover, *what is the possible impact this has on the religious majority and non-majority identifying students?* This study utilizes a primary data-set consisting of three focus groups, each conducted with the partnership of C. Hunter Ritchie (CHR) Elementary School, located in Fauquier County, Virginia. In turn, there is heavy emphasis on sentiment analysis and basic statistical analysis of a collection of both in-class and homework materials provided by each grade level within CHR. This religious studies project is conducted utilizing a strong emphasis on grounded applied linguistic and sociolinguistic methodologies coupled with religious studies theories, discussed throughout the article. With the coupling of statistical and sentiment analysis of focus group transcriptions, along with qualitative primary datasets collected from the focus groups, I analyze and observe how the teachers' general lexicon utilized with their colleagues and within the classroom, is in part, a product of both their own religious background along with the popular religion of the school district itself. I use this in order to herein provide a grounded hypothesis of how this might affect levels of subject-matter retention, focus, and senses of inclusivity and belonging, in Christian and non-Christian students. This project provides further grounding for the continuation of this study, and for the argumentation of effective research methods that can be used to intertwine methodologies of both sociolinguistics and religious studies into the future. In turn, it is my hope that with this grounding, there is now the space for furthering in-depth scholarship focused on the relationship between religious identity, and personal, colloquial, and professional lexicon creations.

Keywords: religion; religious identity; Christianity; sentiment analysis; emotion classification; sociolinguistics; lexicon; God; word-choice; teacher; student; subject-matter retention; learning-style; inclusivity

Introduction

Identity crosses the threshold of professional, personal, and communal relationships when in different social contexts. Moreover, it is something that is often seen as individually manifested, but socially applied, in differentiation/similarity to the other different identities that appear around one in day to day life¹. Whether that be one's socio-economic status, gender-identity, familial background, etc. identity not only shapes one's own biases and perceptions of the world around them, but it also controls and limits the ways in which people interact with one another. This remains true when we discuss religious identity. It is just as important then for us to note that the topic of religion in one's personal identity and morals, can elicit deeply felt emotions and beliefs in students and professors. Religious identity and belief impacts how individuals may act in different professional and social spaces, and it can do so in many different ways, one of which is by regulating/dictating portions of one's language choice. Religious identity affects the way one interacts with others specifically through their language choice, from everything such as how they might greet others, to what they might say after a stranger on the bus sneezes. As James Hartwick (2015) writes; religion is "embedded in our lived experiences in infinite and often invisible ways."²

Much of the recent scholarly research in the coupled fields of education and religious studies, have begun attempting to identify how religion is addressed in public American education systems across the country. From popular topics such as evolutionary versus creation timelines, and many others have been receiving increased attention both politically, and in

¹ Madriz, "Nothing Bad Happens to Good Girls : Fear of Crime in Women's Lives," 31-56.

² Logan, Kimberly, and Hartwick, "Teaching and Talking About Religion: Strategies for Teacher Educators," 167-179.

scholarly literature. However, while such scholarship typically addresses language use secondarily, there has not been a large focus on the topic of lexical choice and religion in the classroom. This type of scholarly work specifically in the field of education helps us to still understand however, a preface of how teachers are being trained to deal with their own language use, and the topic of religion at an early and college level specifically, even if there is not a large amount of scholarship on religious language in the classroom. Moreover, we can see that such trainings and professional preparations come directly from teachers' preparation programs and college educations, and that such a training differs heavily from institutions across the country³. According to Callaway and Farrington (2019), "Most colleges of education are sending graduates into public school classrooms who have never been taught about religious freedom or how it and the First Amendment apply to public schools..."⁴. When discussing how religious identity affects teachers' lexical choices within school spaces therein, it is crucial to know how teachers are first and foremost, trained to handle discussions of religion within the classroom itself from sources similar to this.

Using this preface and background, this study employs an in-depth review of literature and theory of relevant religious studies and linguistics scholarship, and is primarily rooted in theories of religious studies and methodologies of applied and socio-linguistics as well. I follow this up with the creation of my own primary dataset and methodology, utilizing a case study of C. Hunter Ritchie (CHR) Elementary School, along with a series of four different focus groups all focusing on how teachers speak on a basis of morality, life lessons, and religion within the

³ Callaway and Farrington, "The Georgia 3Rs ('rights, responsibility, and respect') project" 46.

⁴ Ibid, 46.

classroom. The empirical testing strategy of this dataset takes the transcripts of these focus groups and therein focuses on R-Programming based sentiment analysis and emotion classification, in order to better quantify the feelings expressed by the teachers within the focus groups on the multitude of different topics mentioned, all of which have to do with how teachers' religious belief may or may not come into the classroom setting. By coupling all the techniques mentioned above, I am therein able to provide a grounded conclusion and answer to the guiding research question, "Do teachers' personal religious beliefs have an impact on their lexical choices within the classroom?"

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. I first discuss my theoretical framework, by giving initial thanks and acknowledgment to scholars of religious studies and applied/socio-linguistics of whom this study would not have been possible. Therein, I move to discuss my overall methodology, how it was conceptualized, and how it has been actualized through this case study as well. I provide a brief layout of my statistical analysis, sentiment analysis, and emotion classification, before providing details and grounding in my own personal observational conclusions and findings that were made throughout the focus groups. In the final section of the paper, I am able to provide a grounded answer to the research question, while making plausible hypotheses for some of the study's relevant subquestions, and finally suggesting for future scholarship in the field of religious language in the U.S. public elementary schooling system.

Theoretical Framework

In combining theories from the disciplines of sociolinguistics and religious studies, I argue, as mentioned above, that it is crucial to work within the foundations provided by scholars in each. By coupling such theories and methodologies from scholars in both fields, I have been able to develop my new, grounded methodology discussed throughout the course of this paper. Thus my theoretical framework is built with a core understanding and consideration of scholars in both fields, in the hopes that I may also better advocate for further coupling the potential of future scholarship on language and religion in the field of education specifically. It is just as important to note that without the acknowledgment and accomplishment of scholars such as Catherine Bell, Clifford Geertz, Peter Berger, Susanne Langer, and Rosina Lippi-Green, this research would not have been possible to conduct.

Theories of Religious Studies

The first and most directly connected scholar who I look to, is Dr. Catherine Bell. Bell is an American religious studies scholar who focuses on the study of Chinese religions and traditions. With this she also focuses specifically in ritual studies, using her experience with Chinese and Asian religions as a starting basis. Ritual is a structural mechanism of which is meant to reintegrate two differing and even opposing dichotomies, and it is a term that is crucial to understanding Bell's research in the field. In her work, Bell theorizes how rituals differentiate through conceptual blueprints based in different communities on a basis of social rule and interaction in many ways.⁵ Ritual is a performance of conceptual orientations, and in looking at

⁵ Bell, "Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions," 91.

the specific differentiations, it can be seen that ritual is something that is co-constructed in social spaces made up of people who also co-create the meaning of said ritual. ⁶ It is something that can build up the sense of community, and in turn, it is an entity that also holds the ability to tear a community down, bringing with it, the loss of senses of inclusion and belonging for many community members. Bell frequently studies ritual in her work in order to analyze and to deconstruct the belief/behavior dichotomy, or the sociocultural theory in religious studies that describes how ones own behaviors in different social spaces are created out of ones own identity, and in that, from ones own religious beliefs as well. ⁷ How does one's own beliefs affect the ways in which they conduct themselves in different communities? This is important to understand, as I utilize her writing on ritual in looking at the focus groups conducted through this study. As her research focuses on how rituals and their meanings are co-created by social aspects of communities, I am able to see how similar effects and processes are in place within the socially-charged focus groups which I run here. I expand upon Bell's prospectus with my own question: How does one's own religious beliefs affect how they interact within specific rule governed speech events and communities? Moreover, how can we observe such interactions within the simulated space of the focus group? In the context of this paper, I offer the definition of each teacher's interaction with their fellow teachers, their students, and their students' parents, as rule governed speech events, where there are specific, communal, yet generally unspoken rules that all participants within the speech event follow quite strictly. Just as Bell writes on the co-creation of ritual and meaning, I also offer here that within these rule governed speech events,

⁶ Bell, 91-108.

⁷ Ibid, 94-117.

the language rules in place, have been co-created both the teachers and the students within the shared social space. Each interaction therefor, between teachers, their colleagues, and their students, maintains core language rules and regulations of how each teacher will speak, and what diction they will use. This is moreover, quite similar to the rules and regulations within community ritual, as mentioned above by Bell. ⁸

On the same topic, Bell argues that ritual is utilized in order to be a symbol of the bridge between social change and tradition in a community ⁹. Bell posits that ritual is actually a way of communicating about the divine to other humans, rather than being a way of communicating from humans directly to the divine itself same¹⁰. There are many examples of this, such as Christians going to church for the reason of how they are seen by others around them, rather than for the specific reason of communicating through or with God. I ask, how does this translate to teachers in their professional spaces? Bell's work also emphasizes factors of 'performance' in ritual and rite. Generally when a ritual occurs, there is some level and manner of performance which enacts a certain ethos unto a person. They will then act in a way that does not break the ethos, and in turn, they will speak in a way that maintains the ethos as well. Bell's theories insinuate that individuals participating in rituals are quite like an actor, in the way that they are simply saying and doing things, of which often disregard their personal thoughts or questions. This is another theory and definition that I keep in mind when analyzing the teachers participating in the focus groups, and in dictating what may be natural speech, versus 'performance.'

⁸ Bell, 89-98.

⁹ Ibid, 171.

¹⁰ Ibid, 172.

Another important theorist of ritual and religion is Dr. Clifford Geertz. Geertz was born in San Francisco and taught at both the University of Chicago and Princeton. He focuses on fieldwork with his wife in Indonesia, and he is considered by many in the field to be one of the most influential American anthropologists. Geertz writes and develops ideas revolving around the purpose and meaning of symbols as a whole ¹¹. He also argues that religions can be defined at a core level, as a system of symbols as well ¹². In my research, I suggest that specifically when looking at classroom materials, the power and purpose of religious symbolism is crucial to understand, so that we may also understand the possible affect that it can have on students within the classroom where it may appear. Whether this be a bible within an in-classroom library, or possibly a cross or poster publicly displayed by the teacher, the existence and effect of religious symbols is important to understand here. In defining how religious language works and affects those both within and outside of the specific belief system moreover, we see many similarities with the effects of religious symbolism. Geertz discusses how religious symbolism has the capability to guide specific communities, and influence ‘outsiders’ as well, and thus I posit here, that ‘hidden’ (or not explicit) religious language and diction can function the same.

The focus group data in this study is complemented heavily by writing on how religious symbols and diction (and in this case, language) can embed themselves into specific teachers’ classroom materials. Based on the teachers’ religious beliefs, I hypothesize that we may be able to see such symbolism in documents such as classroom assignments, posters, reading selections, holiday activities, etc., and that this can be shown through portions of the focus groups. I use

¹¹ Geertz, “Works and Lives : the Anthropologist as Author,” 121-125.

¹² Ibid, 121-138.

Geertz's work, theorizing about how to best study key religious studies terms such as 'religious' and 'symbol' in order to better understand the power they might have both inside and outside of the classroom. It is important to note also then, that Geertz writes from the perspective of a Particularist, and thus he views religion as always functioning in ways that are particular to the culture, rather than universal. He thus understands the interaction and co-creation of religious symbols in culture, and writes on this in many deep descriptions of culture that both describes what people do and along with reviews including what practitioners say about what people do, and how such descriptions can differ.¹³ In his methodology he maintains great focus on universality between many different themes and religious symbols which he found and studied in the world.¹⁴ He does so by writing extensively on the many commonalities he found in religious symbols across many different religious traditions, primarily in East and South East Asia. Though many of his ideas have been outdated, his methodology and thick description and observation of religious symbolism in the field is highly influential in the field of anthropology, religious studies, and to this scholarship as well.

The final religious studies scholar of which I have built my framework, is Peter Berger. Berger is a radical agent of change and criticism when it comes to the field of sociology and religious studies. His seemingly modernist approach to religious studies are found specifically in his theories of social construction. In his work, "The Social Construction of Reality; a Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge," (1966) Berger discusses secularization versus de-secularization, and religion's place in the present and into the future. Ultimately, Berger's writing on the "social

¹³ Geertz, 125-141.

¹⁴ Ibid, 123.

construction,” discusses how the ‘social’ is both defined and co-constructed in different communities.¹⁵ His writings gave way to theories of constructionism, post-structuralism, postmodernism, etc. His theoretical work on how different ‘realities’ are built, help me to complement the previous work noted on how communities and social spaces are built and concreated by many individuals as well. Berger goes on to argue that language as the primary agent for creating a reality, and for creating a social agreement that is understood by all participants within said agreement, an idea that is core within this study’s research and methodology.¹⁶ These ideas, and themes from his particular methodologies show up quite visibly in his works such as *The Sacred Canopy* (2011) and many others.

Theories of Socio-Linguistics

The primary scholar of linguistics whose seminal work has helped frame that of my own, is the work of Susanne K. Langer. Susanne K. Langer was born in New York City in 1895 and attended Radcliffe College. Her books include *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study of the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art* (1942), *Feeling and Form* (1953), and *Mind: An Essay in Human Feeling* (1967). In all of these selections and others, Langer explores how language separates humans from the rest of the animal kingdom. While my study does not hold this framing dichotomy of language as specifically human at its core, it is how she frames such an argument in her research that therein is pertinent to my own study. In discussing language as a solely human concept, Langer contends that the use of symbols – in addition to the use of signs that animals also use –

¹⁵ Berger, "The Social Construction of Reality; a Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge," 71-80.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 78-101.

frees humans not only to react to their environment but also to think about, and to perceive it.¹⁷ She goes on to write that language is one concept that from birth unto death, frames the very way that humans think and perceive the world around them.¹⁸ It is helpful therein that this study focuses on a similar concept: how aspects of identity (in this case religion) frame how teachers speak, in the particular rule governed speech event and space that is the classroom. Langer's work lays the foundation upon which we can better study lexical choices and their relation to ones' own religious beliefs.

While my study looks at the question of whether or not teachers' religious identity affects their lexical choices, it is still also meant to provide a grounded basis of how to continue such scholarship into the future, suggesting later the necessity of student-teacher observation in order to analyze whether or not religious language choice in the classroom can affect students as well. Langer's theory and methodology is also helpful giving incite to this suggestion and to the benefits of in-person observation and analysis of language. If Langer's theories hold true in the course of this research, this would also suggest that if I find a strong relationship between teachers religious identity, and language choice, that such a seemingly small thing could actually have very real effects on how students perceive all they are being taught by the teacher as well. Moreover, if teachers are found to have religious language in an otherwise dictated 'secular' and government regulated space, this means that the teachers language choice could also have effects on how students may even succeed, or fail, in relationship to how much or what kind of religious language some teachers may bring into the class as a whole. Finally, I build off of the

¹⁷ Langer, "Philosophy in a New Key : a Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art," 103-108.

¹⁸ Ibid, 132-135.

popular Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, which theorizes that language has power and can control how you see the world. This hypothesis has helped me to conceptualize this study by having a backed, grounded, and heavily used, hypothesis of how language is learned, and how that language allows for ones perception of different aspects of the world to change continuously on a basis of said language throughout all ages in life. ¹⁹

The last scholar whose role in the field of linguistics and socio-linguistic helps to ground my methodology specifically, is the work of Dr. Rosina Lippi-Green. Lippi-Green is the author of the hugely influential book, *English with an Accent: Language, Ideology and Discrimination in the United States* (2017), whose second edition now contains an entire chapter dedicated to language issues and political discrimination in Hawai'i, and the United States as a whole. Discussing everything from media influence to the judicial system, she examines language attitudes in the United States and exposes the ways in which discrimination based on accent serves to perpetuate power asymmetries in US society on a basis of language itself ²⁰. More specifically, Lippi-Green writes on the power differentials and inequities that are exacerbated by differences in personal lexical choices, vernaculars, and accents, and how such aspects of ones' language can either hinder or help them within both professional and social circles. Before leaving academia to become a full-time writer, Dr. Lippi-Green received her Ph.D. in Linguistics from Princeton University and served as a faculty member at the University of Michigan for ten years. She studies the public language of political candidates, and addresses complicated questions and topics of audience accommodation, space/language performance and authenticity.

¹⁹ Pinxten, "Universalism Versus Relativism in Language and Thought Proceedings of a Colloquium," 1-24.

²⁰ Lippi-Green, "English with an Accent : Language, Ideology, and Discrimination in the United States," 10-26.

In her work, she has found that when it comes to language choice itself, topics having to do with race, sex, class and education were raised in public forums in ways that overlapped with issues of performance and authenticity, and the affects language can have on particular audience. ²¹ This lays the foundation of what I will call a ‘common ground’ of speech, which I discuss briefly in my methodology section. Furthermore, Lippi-Green's work helps to establish how best to analyze the lexical choices of public officials, in professional spaces versus personal ones, and how their performance is dictated and shifted by their lexical choices. ²²In my study, it was important for each teacher to feel fully comfortable in the focus groups, so that I could visualize how they might actually speak when with their colleagues, and with their students within the classrooms. To this end, I address and keep in mind key aspects of performance and accommodation/authenticity raised by Lippi-Green when analyzing the results of lexical choice in the focus groups.

Building Focus Groups: A Dataset of Collective Conversations

While this study uses a heavy theoretical emphasis grounded in religious studies scholarship, my methodological emphasis is both grounded in, and constructed out of applied linguistic and sociolinguistic methodologies. When focusing on interviews, we as researchers are able to identify and study parts of the ‘self.’ ²³ In turn, studies are most effective when a study’s qualitative unit of analysis is, in fact, some part of what we might call the ‘self.’ However, when looking at common ground speech, (read: speech allowed within a specific social community or

²¹ Lippi-Green, 54-100.

²² Ibid, 81-82

²³ Madriz, “Nothing Bad Happens to Good Girls : Fear of Crime in Women’s Lives,” 28-30.

rule governed speech event) it is even more pertinent to study how aspects of identity and of the ‘self’ interact with others when placed inside the co-constructed social space/speech event.

In this study, I translate different interview techniques, into methodology that changes my unit of analysis from that of the ‘self’ to one of the ‘group.’ I do this by creating focus groups consisting of two teachers, each of whom know the other within the specific group quite well. This helps me to create a more comfortable environment for the teachers in my focus groups to speak to one another in a way that is most like how they might speak in their own school, and in turn, in the professional environments of their own individual classrooms. My methodology does this by allowing for the teachers to talk about personal topics with their close and trusted friends, in a space, that they are able to shape and maneuver as they would like, and moreover, in a space where I actually speak as little as possible. In this social space, different to that of an interview, the teachers seem to quickly forget that they are participating in a study, or that they are being recorded via Zoom, and in turn, they speak very closely to as they would, if I was not there. When looking at the process of the focus group, it is helpful to see other studies that have held similar philosophies and methodologies as well.

Madriz’s (1997) study of women’s fear of crime is very effective in visualizing how this way of thinking about the relations between the self and the social (read: ‘group’) can function in focus group work specifically.²⁴ In her study, and through running multiple focus group conversations, Madriz realized that the emotion of fear is a collective and socially activated phenomenon.²⁵ Moreover, in her seminal work, she fully establishes what it looks like to use the

²⁴ Madriz, 20-28.

²⁵ Ibid, 15-28.

“group” or the “social” interaction as the primary qualitative unit of analysis.²⁶ This allows for her to understand fear as a ‘collective phenomenon’ as she discusses it, rather than an entity born out individuals in individual spaces.²⁷ The implications of her insights in her study are profound and help guide the work and methodology of this study.

Focus groups are perfect sites for empirical investigations of the new theoretical formulations posed here, about the relationship between aspects of identity and of one’s religious own ‘religiousness,’ and their lexical choices. In particular, focus groups allow for us to see how, when talking about religion in the classroom, the lexical choices of each teacher, and the emotions they represent, seem to naturally co-emerge while in conversation with one another. This therein allows for us to analyze the social contexts and processes in which teachers make their own lexical choices, while in a professional ‘rule-governed’ speech event and space with their close colleagues. Focus groups are, moreover, the perfect sites for inquiry into how aspects on one's own religious identity mingles and functions when directly approached by the identity of others. This is due to the fact that within the focus groups, the teachers are allowed to stem the conversation in whatever way they feel, and thus, maneuver through the conversation as they feel most comfortable. It also means that, if at any point in time during the focus group, the teachers did not want to discuss a topic, they had the full agency to stop doing so. While an initially risky decision when it comes to data collection, this format helps to measure and dictate specifically which topics and terms within the focus groups, that the teachers feel most and least comfortable with.

²⁶ Ibid, 35-48.

²⁷ Madriz, 15-24.

In this study, I attempt to develop a workable methodology combining the fields of religious studies, applied linguistics, and data science. I, in turn, also use ‘focus groups’ to entail a broad range of facilitated social activity between many teachers all located within the same elementary school. In this subsection of the study, I also refer to them as ‘collective conversations’ in order to reemphasize the very natural dialogue that is occurring within them. When focus groups such as those present within this study, are allowed to be more free-flowing, they also allow the participants to take over the interview space, and even to again, regulate where the conversation goes themselves. As the purpose of this study is to simulate whether the teachers utilize religious language on a variety of classroom-focused topics, it became just as intriguing to see whether or not they might regulate the language of themselves or their colleagues, while in the focus group space. This methodology allows for me to analyze both the group dynamics, and their personal lexical choices in an environment meant to closely simulate how they might speak when in the classroom and with other teachers. While still not a ‘natural’ language-governed speech event, these focus groups have allowed for me to formulate reliable approximations to the natural interactions that might happen within the space of their own school and classrooms.

Context and Methodology

‘Morality in The Classroom’

As stated above, this study maintains a core focus on the primary data set collected via four different mini-focus groups, each conducted virtually over the course of two weeks (April 12th, 2022 - April 24th, 2022). Each focus group in this study is constructed of 2 elementary school

teachers from C. Hunter Ritchie Elementary School (located in Fauquier County, Virginia) who already know each other well. In order to help with demographic visualization of the focus groups, the listing of each focus group pairing in terms of grade year, is included here in Appendix A. It is important to note, that this project would not have been possible without the gracious collaboration with C. Hunter Ritchie Elementary School, its teachers, and its staff. For the protection of each participant, and to maintain full anonymity, each teacher has been assigned an alias name, which has no relation to their actual name, title, or position.

While it is important to this study's methodology to allow for each group to dictate how each focus group functions and runs, they still followed the same semi-structured formula in order to maintain some level of cohesion in the results. Each focus group, in turn, began with the same question: "Please describe your opinion on the topic of How morality shapes the classroom environment. Does it?"

When it comes to the topic of religion appearing through lexical choices in the classroom, it is pertinent to allow the participants to discuss a variety of more general topics that are often associated with the topic of religion and Christianity as well. As this was conducted with solely public school teachers, they are well aware of their position, and moreover, with the necessity of separating church and state within the public school classroom as well. They are well educated, and in the space that is the social focus group, they are with their colleagues who share the same training, and knowledge of their position. Because of these prefaces, I decide to begin each section with the question of morality, and to allow for them, to some extent, to take the conversation wherever they felt it should go after each general guiding question. However, once God, Christianity, Religion, Belief, or other similar terms, come into the conversation naturally, I

then probe specific questions in order to dig deeper into the topic of religion as well. After each focus group concluded, I transcribed each focus group session, while removing any sections of my own speech, so that it would be possible to quantify and to analyze the lexical choices of each teacher during the session, and during specific portions/topics within each session.

Data Analytics and Sentiment Analysis

In order to best analyze and quantify the focus groups, there needs to be a deeper understanding of each teachers personal feelings on the topic of religion in the classroom, on a basis of their language use. While this is supported later by my own personal observations, for this section of the analysis, I utilize both VoyantTools and R Programming in order to analyze the full transcripts of each focus group.

By coupling publicly available Sentiment Analysis and Emotion Classification API's, and running the code through R, I define the emotions exhibited on a numerical basis for different topics by the different teachers. Moreover, the scale of sentiment scores has been generated by the following scales: 1) *bing* – binary scale with -1 indicating negative and +1 indicating positive sentiment and 2) *afinn* – integer scale ranging from -5 to +5. It should also be noted that for the key terms analysis and selection, the terms which have an asterisk after them indicate that the analysis included all forms and tenses of the given key word (ie analysis of the word *Christian** also includes the following terms: *Christianity, Christians, Christians'*, etc).

For the purpose of separating ideas of 'religion' which I believe to be more of a proper and academic term in a space such as this one, with other more personal terms such as 'God,' I tested the sentiment analysis of two culminated categories of key word association: 1) *Religion**

and Christian* and 2) God* and Belief*. The purpose for my differentiation here, is because from an observational standpoint within the focus groups, Christianity and Religion would often be used more academically and broadly, whereas, God and Belief seemed to be used more when discussing personal associations and experiences with religion. As this study is meant to help center the teachers own personal religious beliefs within the conversation, to better see whether or not they bring in religious language into the classroom, this differential also helps to see what emotions are exhibited specially when they are talking on the topic of religion and Christianity in general terms, versus the emotions exhibited when brining in their own personal religious experiences and beliefs into the conversation. In turn, one of the primary controls in order to keep the results of the data analysis usable, and to help limit human error, I employ the measured feeling of trust as a control variable. In all of the focus groups, trust (shown in Figures 1.A and 2.A blow) has remained incredibly high on all topics, showing that all participants were comfortable in sharing their own experiences and beliefs honestly throughout the entirety of the focus groups. This is incredibly important when analyzing the statistical analysis results, and in ensuring that the measured feelings were a product of the topic at hand, rather than a situation built by awkwardness that can sometimes come from an interview, or focus group style of research.

Results

Sentiment Analysis and Emotion Classification

As shown in Figures 1.B and 2.B, the sentiment analysis scores for the key terms are quantitatively much higher for the terms Religion* and Christian*. This is shown through the

average affin and bing generated sentiment score means of 0.8243, 0.7714, and 2.229. Whereas the sentiment analysis scores for the key terms of God* and Belief* shown in Figure 2.B, are respectively lower. The average affin and bing generated sentiment scores for God* and Belief* are: 0.5116, 0.3871, and 1.432. This shows us that when the teachers were discussing topics associated closely with the terms Religion* and Christian*, they would utilize other lexical choices associated with negative emotion and negative connotation. Whereas, when the teachers were discussing topics associated with God* and Belief*, they would exhibit both more positive and neutral connotations and emotions. We can further analyze this through the emotion classifications shown in Figures 1.A and 2.A. We can see that in Figure 1.A (Emotional Classification of Religion* and Christian*), there is high anticipation, joy and trust. In Figure 2.A (Emotional Classification of God* and Belief*), there is a much higher level of both anticipation and joy, but also a large spike in measured feeling of fear as well. This means that when teachers were discussing the topic of God* and Belief*, rather than that of Religion* and Christian*, they utilized lexical choices associated closely with fear, on a much larger scale. It should be noted that trust remains high in both analyses, and that this is most likely due to the trust in both myself running the focus group, as well as being close with the other participant in the focus group. Moreover, it is important to note that there needs to be a more in depth analysis to analyze the level of joy exhibited in both analyses, though I predict here, that it maintains similar reasoning to why trust remains quite high as well.

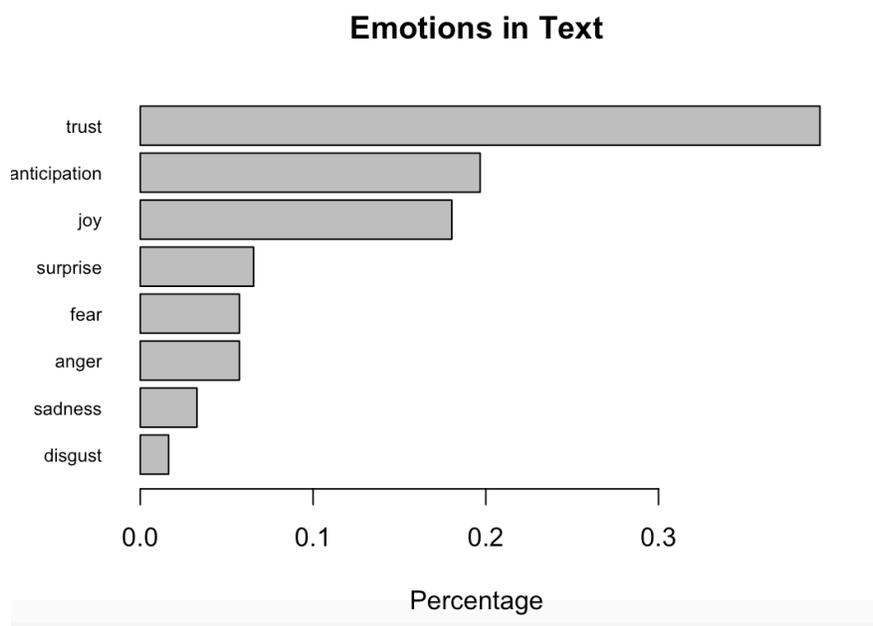


Figure 1. A (Emotional Classification of Religion* and Christian*)

```

> # regular sentiment score using get_sentiment() function and method of your choice
> # please note that different methods may have different scales
> syuzhet_vector <- get_sentiment(text, method="syuzhet")
> # see the first row of the vector
> head(syuzhet_vector)
[1] 0.90 1.45 2.90 0.50 3.15 0.50
> # see summary statistics of the vector
> summary(syuzhet_vector)
  Min. 1st Qu.  Median    Mean 3rd Qu.   Max.
-1.5000  0.0000  0.6000  0.8243  1.3750  3.1500
> # bing
> bing_vector <- get_sentiment(text, method="bing")
> head(bing_vector)
[1] 1 2 2 1 3 1
> summary(bing_vector)
  Min. 1st Qu.  Median    Mean 3rd Qu.   Max.
-2.0000  0.0000  1.0000  0.7714  1.0000  3.0000
> #affin
> afinn_vector <- get_sentiment(text, method="afinn")
> head(afinn_vector)
[1] 0 5 6 4 5 2
> summary(afinn_vector)
  Min. 1st Qu.  Median    Mean 3rd Qu.   Max.
 0.000  0.000  2.000  2.229  3.500 10.000

```

Figure 1. B (Sentiment Analysis of Religion* and Christianity*)

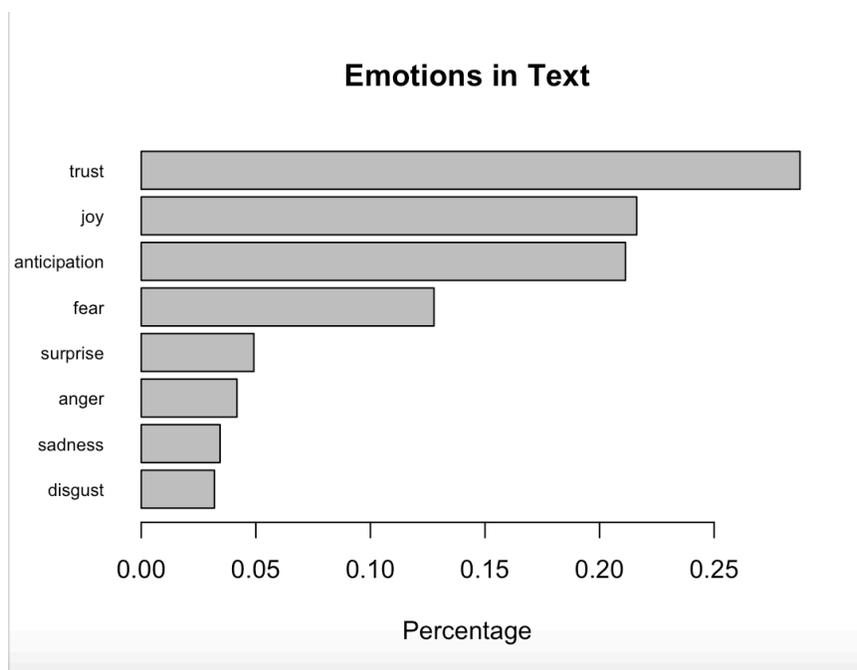


Figure 2. A (Emotion Classification of God* and Belief*)

```

> # regular sentiment score using get_sentiment() function and method of your choice
> # please note that different methods may have different scales
> syuzhet_vector <- get_sentiment(text, method="syuzhet")
> # see the first row of the vector
> head(syuzhet_vector)
[1] -0.75 0.00 0.00 2.50 2.65 1.50
> # see summary statistics of the vector
> summary(syuzhet_vector)
  Min. 1st Qu.  Median    Mean 3rd Qu.    Max.
-1.5000 0.0000  0.0000  0.5116  0.7500  4.2500
> # bing
> bing_vector <- get_sentiment(text, method="bing")
> head(bing_vector)
[1] -2 0 0 2 3 1
> summary(bing_vector)
  Min. 1st Qu.  Median    Mean 3rd Qu.    Max.
-2.0000 0.0000  0.0000  0.3871  1.0000  4.0000
> #affin
> afinn_vector <- get_sentiment(text, method="afinn")
> head(afinn_vector)
[1] 0 0 0 8 6 4
> summary(afinn_vector)
  Min. 1st Qu.  Median    Mean 3rd Qu.    Max.
-2.000  0.000  0.000  1.432  3.000  12.000

```

Figure 2. B (Sentiment Analysis of God* and Belief*)

Fear and Trust: Discussions of Teacher Identity and Language

Teachers, specifically at the U.S. public elementary school level, must be able to navigate many various social controversies and students who maintain different political, ethnic, and religious positions. They need to be able to do so, in order to best create their classroom as one that is meant for all students within their given district. Moreover, in doing this, lexical choice of the student and of the teacher in the classroom, both become incredibly important in fostering such an environment. In recent scholarship, the study of classrooms as spaces of rule governed speech, and thus the lexical choices made within it, have become a key topic in educational and linguistic research due to its links and effects with student learning and content retention.²⁸ This topic often comes into the main-stage of educational research on a basis of sociocultural theoretical perspectives, which generally cite language as a mediating tool for thinking, and for how one perceives the world throughout all ages in their life.²⁹ This relationship between speaking, thinking, and perceiving has established learning as a primarily social activity through which meaning and thus retention is co-constructed through a student teacher pedagogy within the classroom.³⁰ For the context of this study, language choice within the classroom must also be established as crucial when discussing student content-retention, and it's possible negative and positive effects on students within the classroom. Considering the classroom context further, knowledge and language rules are co-constructed through interaction between classroom participants, in this case, namely the teacher and the students. This constitutes the prologue to the impact of my findings presented.

²⁸ Resnick, Asterhan, and Clarke, "Socializing Intelligence through Academic Talk and Dialogue," 10-23.

²⁹ Ibid, 29-31.

³⁰ Littleton and Mercer, "Interthinking: Putting Talk to Work," 1-23.

By seeing the emotions and sentiment analysis discussed previously by the teachers on different topics, I find that all of the teacher participants, are much more comfortable talking about Christianity, and religion in broader senses, but that they exhibit a strong level of fear and anticipation when it comes to them talking about their own personal beliefs (measured through a correlation sentiment analysis with key terms: God* and Belief*). However, that being said, when prompted to discuss morality in the classroom, all four focus groups brought in the idea of both topics on God, religion, or belief to some minor extent without specific prompting from myself. In each of these situations, many of the participants also quickly began to catch themselves very early on, frequently making hurried statements such as “Oh, well I know I am not supposed to talk about this,” and others. As each conversation continued, it became evident that each teacher mostly likely did in fact use some extent of religious language in their classroom environments (even to very minor extents), but that while in the focus group, they were balancing this natural use of religious language, with the knowledge that they know they are not supposed to be discussing these topics (measured through the emotion classification of anticipation). We can tell this, due to the fact that they seemed very fearful in such a comfortable space when discussing their own personal religious beliefs on the topics of morals, but that regardless of any expressed fear or anticipation, they would still continue to discuss such topics to great and lengthy extents.

In order to better probe into this idea, and to better see how it might translate when interacting with their students specifically, I asked each of the focus groups, whether or not they regulated religious language in their classroom. As many of the questions began, I left it broad to see what examples would naturally come to mind for them first, and in almost every focus group,

almost immediately, every participant stated plainly that they did not. However, when further prompted with the specific examples of “Oh my God,” “God dang it,” “God this sucks,” and others similar to them, the majority of the teachers were again, quick to state that such phrases were not in fact, allowed in their classrooms, despite the popular claim that such language generally does not come up, and that they do not regulate it. In order to ensure that the reasoning was in fact the lexical choice of the religious word “God,” rather than a tone of voice rational for regulating such language, I then asked each group how they would describe to the students the reasoning for not being allowed to use such phrases. Many of them stated plainly that most students at the elementary level wouldn’t ask for reasoning, but others stated that the reasoning was in fact that it was a misuse of the “Lord’s name in vain.”

After identifying this practice of religious language use however, it is crucial in limiting as much room for error or ambiguity, to actually identify if the language choice is semantically null (if the language is using religious terms, without invoking religious meaning or connotation within the speaker). This is a large part of my analysis, as it is necessary to understand the conclusion of whether or not religious language appears with religious meaning to the speaker themselves, and what effects it may therein entail for both students and speaker, or teachers. To better cope with this, I use VoyantTools in order to do a correlation and context analysis for each time the religious term was used in the focus group. This allowed me to see in what context each term was brought up, every time that it was brought up. I then use this context analysis to remove phrases where religious terms are used, but where they are not specifically discussing invoking words such as “god,” “bless,” or otherwise in a religious context.

Another frequented example that came into the conversation quite often was the listing of in-class lessons, assignments, and conversations during the time periods leading up to and following religious holidays such as, Halloween, Christmas, and Easter. On these topics, a large majority of the teachers discussed that in recent years, many of them have begun thinking about forgoing holiday-themed activities in lieu of switching to season focused celebrations instead (often citing a fear of bringing in religion/religious symbols/decorations blatantly into their classrooms). One language-based commonality that almost all of the teachers shared on the topic of religious holiday-centered instruction, was the fact that many of them always ask the entirety of the class if they celebrated the specific holiday, at least a week or two leading up to it. Those who did not practice this questioning however, stated that they were comfortable not doing so after further contemplation, because as one participant noted, “most of the kids, even the ones who aren’t Christian, will usually celebrate Christmas, etc.” With the multiple examples and probes in the focus group, it is plausible to conclude that the teachers use religious language, and in fact, also regulate religious language within their classrooms, and that such lexicons and rulesets were built, in part from their own religious upbringings, backgrounds, and beliefs. To be certain of this, a future study could employ the same methodologies here with larger focus groups, more diverse participant demographics, and in turn, couple this conclusion with long-term in-class observation of the teachers as well.

In summary, on the one hand, all teachers exhibited negative words about God and belief in the classroom, as they know it is not allowed through a basis separation of ‘church and state,’ as many of them would cite in the focus groups. On the other hand, it appeared difficult for a large majority of the teachers to either regulate their own lexical choices (to not personally use

religious lexical choices), or to refrain from regulating students lexical choices (to allow for their students to freely use religious lexical choices) when it came to discussing specifically in-class instruction. Moreover, while every focus group knew the importance of separating religion from in-class instruction, many of the teacher participants continued to invoke their own religious identities and beliefs, when it came to discussing their methods of in class instruction with their colleagues. In this study, the classroom is understood to be a discursive practice.³¹ Meaning specifically, that the classroom space is one in which the different levels of identity of both teachers and students come into contact with each other in very particular ways.³² The classroom moreover, is a social space in which the school subject, the content of the curriculum, the student's and teacher's preceding knowledge and understanding of the subject, and other localized aspects, all affect how the classroom will be run every day. However, it is just as important to note that articulations in the classrooms are also influenced by how the surrounding community addresses the specific issues and in turn, both the students' and teachers' personal experiences with topics as well.³³ With the vastly majority white, Christian, community of Fauquier County, Virginia, that C. Hunter Ritchie is located within, this may not be a massive cause for alarm. However, if these patterns were studied further and seen to continue in classroom practice outside of this Northern Virginia case study, and possibly into more diverse

³¹ Flensner, "Secularized and Multi-Religious Classroom Practice-Discourses and Interactions," 116-128.

³² Ibid, 131.

³³ Ibid, 131-142.

classroom settings, it does have the possibility of affected the students adversely and disproportionately (specifically for non-Christian students in this case).³⁴

Language has the capability to control and shape the way that we, as humans, perceive and retain information about the reality and world around us³⁵. In the socially constructed space that is the classroom then, this remains true³⁶. How teachers talk, how they refuse to talk, along with how they regulate speech, all have the ability to effect the students, how they retain lessons and content, and even possibly, whether or not they feel a sense of inclusivity and belonging within the classroom. As the way of speaking exhibited by the teachers, and measured by the emotion classification (using the measure of ‘Trust’), was in fact, close to natural, we can predict that all the observations noted above, have the likelihood of continuing into the likewise, natural speaking setting of the classroom itself. This plausible prediction remains true for both the negatively associated topics, and that of the positively associated topics outlined here as well. As noted above it was, in every focus group, a common theme for teachers to bring in personally motivated religious language at some point, if not many, throughout the duration of the conversations. While the reasons for this is almost certainly an amalgamation of different individually and socially constructed motivations, it still answers the primary research question of mine as to “if teachers’ religious beliefs affect their lexical choices within the classroom?”

Some prospective reasons for this might be related to not being able to separate personal religious belief from the workspace, the majority white, majority Christian demographic of the

³⁴ Vrikki, Maria, Brindley, Manzoorul Abedin, and Riga “Exploring Dialogic Space: a Case Study of a Religious Education Classroom,” 469-485.

³⁵ Finegan, Edward, and Rickford, “Language in the U.S.A. : Themes for the 21st Century,” 80-112.

³⁶ Berger, 108-115.

school itself creating a more loosely regulated speech setting, or otherwise. In order to fully conclude on the reasoning, there needs to be further study into the topic. From this research, it is clear that teachers' religious upbringings, backgrounds, and beliefs translate into their lexical choices within the focus groups, and thus within the classrooms. However, we are still unable to see the possible effects that this has on both Christian, and non-Christian students. In order to continue this study, I would herein suggest that in using the preface provided by this study, the next point of relevant scholarship, would be extensive and lengthy in-class observation and student-centered focus groups, created on a basis of the theoretical grounding/methodology that this study is meant to provide as well. Overall, the relationships between lexical choices of teachers in C. Hunter Ritchie Elementary School and their religious identities as well as their focus group- and other identity- processes, are seen to be of crucial importance.

Conclusion

In this study, I hope to have shown that the relationship between teachers' lexical choice and their own religious identities and belief is one that is important, and deserves increased scholarly attention. Language is something that has the capability to control and shape the way that we, as humans, perceive and retain information about the reality and world around us, and this remains true in the socially constructed spaces of schools and thus the classrooms within them.^{37 38}

Religious lexical choices within the classroom, whether purposeful or otherwise, in turn, has the ability to affect student content retention, in-class attention, as well as feelings of inclusivity and belonging for the students.

³⁷ Berger, 108-135.

³⁸ Finegan, 89-101.

As I have attempted to demonstrate, despite the claim from almost all the teachers in the focus groups of not using, nor regulating specifically religious language in the classroom, all teachers have been seen to invoke religious words, phrases, and parts of their beliefs when answering questions on morality, life lessons, beliefs, and otherwise. Similar to the way that religious symbolism affects members and non-members of the belief system in other socially constructed spaces, religious language used in the classroom has the ability to affect the students as well, though further study needs to be completed to conclude specifically how.³⁹ Through measures of emotion classification and sentiment analysis, we also see that discussing general ideas of religion and Christianity in the classroom come up quite easily, but that when discussing personal beliefs or when bringing in “God” to the conversation, that there is anxiety, and fear exhibited by a majority of the teachers in each group. However while this does remain true throughout all focus groups, the teachers also brought up personal beliefs and “God” in conversation with one another at about four times the amount they discussed religion or Christianity in more general terms. While we can not be entirely sure on why this relationship occurs in this manner, it is likely an accurate representation of how they may speak when inside the classroom.

The ways that the teachers discuss ‘morality’, God, religion, belief, and other key topics/terms differently, and express different emotions about each the focus groups, demonstrates that their lexical choices are in fact impacted by their religious beliefs. It is herein likely, that such a relationship between lexical choice and religious belief, is at once, both individually and socially co-constructed. Particularly in the natural conversation of morality and life lessons within the

³⁹ Bell, 91-100.

classroom and otherwise, we see how each teachers lexical choices within the focus group embodies the teachers' religious identities, and personal knowledges, and in turn, how such a relationship can serve as an ever-evolving medium for religious belief and the way that teachers speak and interact with students, and with one another inside their place of work.

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Appendix A

Focus Group Demographics:

Discussion Group 1: Friday, Apr 15 2022, 12:00PM-1:30PM

- (S) Participant Sallust: (Reading Specialist)
- (P) Participant Pliny: (3rd)

Discussion Group 2: Wednesday, Apr 20 2022, 11:00AM - 12:30PM

- (T) Participant Tacitus: (1st)
- (O) Participant Ovid: (Special Education)

Discussion Group 3: Tuesday, Apr 12 2022, 9:00AM - 10:30AM

- (V) Participant Virgil: (Kindergarten)
- (C) Participant Claudius:(2nd)

Discussion Group 4: Saturday, Apr 20 2022, 8:00AM - 9:30AM

- (A) Participant Appian: (3rd)
- (M) Participant Marcus: (5th)