

Discourse-Historical Approach to Religious Genre: The Case of a Persian Sermon

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Abstract. Inspired by critical discourse analysis as a transdisciplinary multi-approach, both social and linguistic theories user, and social issues manipulator to link socio-political and historical context, this paper was to investigate the layers, topic establishment, discourse strategies, and linguistic means of a Persian sermon. It particularly examined the sermon of an influential native Persian orator to analyze it critically based on Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach (2001), which depicted immediate language, intertextuality, extra-linguistic variables, and dimensions, to make explicit how the sermon genre in the Persian language puts them into practice. The close qualitative scrutiny indicated that the orator of the Persian sermon genre efficiently applied persuasion tools, including intertextuality and interdiscursivity, and discourse strategies, nomination, and predication, to talk over the main topic. This study intended to contribute to Persian learners of English to improve their insights into critical language awareness. It would enable them to act as professionals, teach them how to write, talk or interpret others, and equip them with the capabilities and understandings which are pre-conditions to become international orators.

Keywords: Critical discourse analysis, persian sermon, discourse strategies, discourse-historical approach (DHA)

1. Introduction

In recent decades, critical analysis of sermons, used by orators as persons who can speak to the public very well, give reasons for doing different activities, and influence people to make specific decisions, has been one of the major interesting research subjects in discourse analysis (Mansouri

et al, 2017; El Naggar, 2012; Rizwan, 2011). Sermons were established as a genre by Brinton (1995) who pinpointed the manifestation of a biblical text, the target of the speaker over the audience, and the utilization of genre-specific conventions to perform the intention and awareness of these conventions as some of the elements of Christian sermons. They were also categorized by Longacre (1992) as a hortatory discourse, that is, a subtype of behavioral discourse, and were explained to intend to influence demeanor, that is, forcing its audience to perform something they are not currently doing, to cease something they are doing, to carry on doing something they are already doing, to spend greater energy in an activity that has already been started, to change the nature of their efforts, and so on. A sermon fits the hortatory concept because it is a discursive occasion where whoever enjoys power and knowledge talks over a problem and inspires the group to overwhelm this problem through his/her orientation. The structure of sermons is predisposed by the religious ideals and shared practices of the church and illustrates the values that were preserved or converted through religious history, demonstrating the relevance of the social aspect in this kind of discourse.

Nobody can deny the power of orators and their deterministic role in influencing the outcome of great social disturbances and revolutions, aiming at provoking inspiration and enthusiasm to battle social inequality, getting rid of the yoke of the oppressors, and putting the foundations of a prosperous life steadily. Semantic and grammatical structures are effective wax-like devices of orators to give the grieved comfort, to remind the people of respect-deserving or pride-provoking events, to motivate the people to endanger life and limb, to cry, to laugh out aloud, to feel a responsibility to do moral behaviors and to feel faithful toward the country. The sermons make intelligent use of semantic and syntactic structures as the power behind the throne to guide revolutions and significant social instances. Therefore, there is a great burden of responsibility on the shoulders of those who make a speech for whatever purpose, good or evil, and it is one of the major interesting research subjects due to orators' great influence on the societies' orientations and directions (Mckay & Mckay, 2008).

Although extensive research has been carried out on the discourse

analysis of sermons, no single study existed that made a critical discourse analysis of the Persian sermons with a historical approach. That is, the present study intended to analyze a sermon of a well-known native Farsi or Persian orator from Iran based on the Discourse-historical approach (DHA) suggested by Wodak (2001) to demonstrate the potential of this approach and its suitability of application in the religious genre. This research intended uniquely to add to the growing body of knowledge on critical discourse analysis and contribute its newcomers to practically observe how to reveal co-discourse, intertextuality, extra-linguistic variables, socio-political context, methods of topic establishment, discourse strategies, and various linguistic means in different types of genres and texts.

2. Literature Review

According to Wodak (2015), one phase of the Discourse-historical approach (DHA) is “socio-diagnostic critique” in which the analyst “makes use of her or his background and contextual knowledge and embeds the communicative or interactional structures of a discursive event in a wider frame of social and political relations, processes and circumstances” (p. 3). Rheindorf (2022) proposed that DHA regards discourse as social practices of meaning-making, including not only linguistic but also all semiotic modes of communication. It also shares with many other approaches to critical discourse analysis the fact that DHA is not a method but a theoretical and methodological research program. He assumed that as a problem-oriented or issue-focused approach, DHA is methodologically open and innovative although it has also been called heterogeneous and diverse in the sense that research begins with a social or political issue and builds up a specific research design to investigate it, including decisions on which data to collect and how to analyze them. He meant that, technically, any method of data collection and analysis can be benefitted and combined in research following the DHA, as long as they are epistemologically and phenomenologically consistent with the theoretical framework and goals of the DHA.

DHA as a broad framework or approach to conducting analysis thus does not create a method or even a set of methods, so its ‘toolkit’, has

been evolving since the 1970s (Reisigl and Wodak 2020; Rheindorf 2019; Wodak 2011, 2013; Wodak and Meyer 2015). It has covered several tenets or principles which include considering discourse as all meaning-making practices. Therefore, all semiotic modes are potentially relevant to the analysis, even if language is regarded as predominant on the social level.

The next principle is to regard discourse and society (or social reality) as jointly constitutive, consequently, the analysis must be contextualized in the sense that any phenomenon is analyzed in context. The subsequent tenets include discourses are organized by macro-topics, polyphonous or multi-perspectival, discourses are realized or instantiated in concrete texts, discourses are situated practices, and discourses can be analyzed *inter alia* on three levels: macro-topics, discursive strategies and semi-otic/linguistic means of realization (Rheindorf and Wodak 2020). As an approach to CDA, DHA is committed to analysis-based critique in three complementary forms: textual/discursive, socio-diagnostic, and prospective/retrospective critique (Reisigl and Wodak, 2009; Forchtner, 2011). Granting that discourses are multimodal and embedded in socio-historical contexts opens up research to a principled 'you go where you need to go' in the sense of interdisciplinarity, methodological innovation, and triangulation. Research in DHA has regularly involved triangulation in its four main forms - that is, triangulation of theoretical approaches, triangulation of researcher perspectives, triangulation of different kinds of data, and triangulation of methods.

Sharapan (2022) employed DHA to uncover the rhetorical representation of Tibetan Buddhism to the readers and look into how Tibetan Buddhism was framed in terms of East-West dichotomy in six popular books on Buddhism and spirituality. She utilized an interdisciplinary glance at the issue and inductive application of the Doubleswing model of intercultural communication between the East and the West, a theoretical vision of Intercultural Communication developed by Yoshikawa (1987). In her investigation, DHA aimed at revealing self-contradictory and manipulative linguistic strategies, improving a problematic idea or status-quo, in this case, rhetorical employment of categories of East and West, its implicit ideologies, and implications.

Zhang, Liu, and Zhang (2022) stated that since the pandemic broke

out in 2020, China has widely portrayed the covid crisis in its mass media and actively created a collective identity thereof to organize medical workers, bring together political stances, increase domestic solidarity, and stimulate international support. These researchers combined DHA and a multimodal perspective to investigate how the Chinese state-run news agency People's Daily discursively accomplished these purposes on TikTok. A combination of qualitative and quantitative methods was applied to present the high-frequency topoi of justifying the crisis and referential and predicational strategies of shaping collective identity within, which could fall into four dimensions: positive Self, negative Self, negative Others, and positive Others. The linguistic resources could be intensified/mitigated by visual-aural ensembles, which drew the audience's attention and arouse their emotional attachments.

Although the above investigations critically examined the discourse of religious contexts, to the best of the authors' knowledge, only a few references in the literature systematically describe the sermons from the historical-discourse perspective. This was the motivation behind the present study to research the largely neglected area of the spoken language of religious contexts, especially Muslim orations. That is, the researchers' goal is a critical discourse investigation of native Persian sermons on the topic of peace in life from Islam's point of view based on a well-established taxonomy elaborated below.

3. Method

The present study was spawned from the distinguishing characteristics of DHA such as being interdisciplinary and problem-oriented and having eclectic theory and methodology. This approach determined different tools based on the problem under investigation and engaged multiple genres and the historical context in the interpretation of discourse and text. Therefore, the present study intended to develop a more rigorous understanding of the grand theories based on which this approach was founded. This paper contributed to the extant literature on CDA with a specific focus on a sermon to investigate the Persian language based on DHA depicted in Figure 1. Persian was selected to sharpen the socio-philosophical understanding of Iranians to enable them to compensate

for the breakdown or misinterpretation of communication through text, socio-diagnostic and prognostic critique.

The Persian native orator is Alireza Panahian, one of the famous religious experts and an orator of lots of radio and TV programs in Iran. He has been the cultural vice-president and a professor of university and religious schools and also the author and orator of some Islamic books and hundreds of attractive religious speeches. He is the founder of not only the workshop on correct methods of making religious oratories but also the religious school of Dar-alhekmat where lots of students are taught Islamic sciences to B. A and M. A Degrees in the west of Tehran.

To carry out the analysis, first of all, the historical background information necessary to understand the object under investigation was elaborated on. The second step in the methodology required a description of the sermon based on the four layers. The analysis initiated with the second layer, an examination of interdiscursive and intertextual aspects (also content or topic establishment of the first dimension), and continued to the third and fourth layers. The first layer which is related to the immediate language or co-text analysis is implied in the investigation of nomination, predication, and argumentation aspects of discourse strategies of the second dimension (Figure 1).

The third step necessitated the analysis of the sermon based on the three dimensions of our model, focusing on topoi's use while other categories were applied when topoi occurred. The analysis was sequential, that is, it proceeded sentence by sentence while all prominent features were identified at once. It required the intended spoken sermon on the topic of 'Mystical Tranquility' to be transcribed. The whole argument and interpretation were done based on the DHA suggested by Ruth Wodak (2001) depicted in Figure 1.

4. Results and Discussion

Firstly, it seems necessary to start the discussion of the results with historical background, the general idea of Islam on the topic of Mystical Tranquility in life. One of the demands of human beings has always been achieving true peace which is the source of happiness and without which imaginary thoughts, ideas, and concerns offend human

beings. Therefore, they have suffered attempts with their scientific endeavors and discoveries of unresolved mysteries of the natural world to access facilities to bring peace and comfort to human beings. To gain inner peace, human beings have also resorted to religions to get the most complete instructions for the spirit’s tranquility. From the Holy Quran and Islam’s point of view, there are different ways to achieve peace. The first one is faith, believing and acknowledging God and his prophets from the depth of heart. It is such a strong belief and constant agitation that no doubts can penetrate or shake. Remembrance of God is the second way to peace. Holy Quran expresses that “only with the remembrance of Allah do hearts find rest”. And also “the reward of those who achieve peace position with Allah’s remembrance is the entry to the God’s servants and the entry to heaven”. Trust or assigning things to God is another way of obtaining peace.

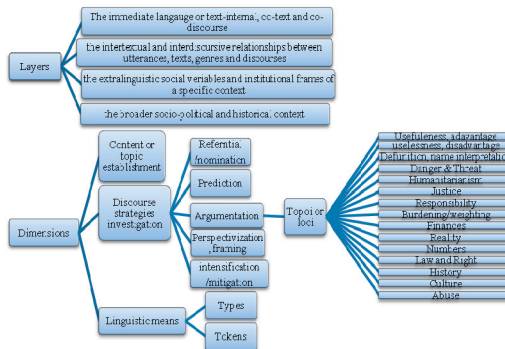


Figure 1. Discourse-historical Approach (Wodak, 2001: 67)

Dear Quran suggests all, especially those who suffer from emotional disorders and a life of poverty or other concerns, to entrust God whose power is superior to all problems. The inner control that protects human beings against sins and slanders, repentance, familiarity with Quran, hope for a good future, sympathy, resorting to Allah from Evil, patience, prayer, charity, chastity, love, and benevolence are all some ways suggested by Quran to achieve peace and tranquility in life.

The second layer of the adopted taxonomy is related to interdiscursivity and intertextuality which are the tools of persuasive language because they help the orators to influence the audience by linking the text to the wider discourse in terms of the social and political usages

(Reisigl and Wodak 2009). The link to other texts “through invoking a topic, an event or a main actor” (Richardson and Wodak 2009, p. 46) is called intertextuality. This element of persuasion is respectively utilized through reference to Ghadr Night when the destiny and the blessings of each person are determined. It is an evident reminder of one of the surahs of the Holy Quran called Ghadr. Then a verse of a piece of the poem is read by the orator to make the main meaning understandable. Another sign of intertextuality is God’s thanks-giving mentioned two times in the text to refer to the first surah of the Holy Quran. After that, the orator mentions a verse from Holy Quran “only with the remembrance of Allah do hearts find rest” to demonstrate the only way of finding tranquility. Other uses of intertextuality are pointing to the story of Romeo and Juliet, the killing of oppressed people of Gaza and Bosnia, and the repeated explanation of Ashura when the third Imam of Shiah Muslims and his follower were killed. The speaker recontextualized these religious elements to use them to interpret the existing events. For example, he uses the story of the attack on the city of the Prophet after Ashura to condemn the modern-day killings of Muslims in different parts of the world.

The relationship between discourses on one topic the other discourses on other topics or subtopics is called interdiscursivity; for instance, discourse on mystical tranquility is interwoven with discourse topics on psychology, politics, music, history, and medicine which are shown in Table 1.

The main discourse topic and sub-topic identification were based on themes presented in each section of the sermon. The complex topical intersections in the text and history-specific-topics dominance and its overlap with politics are apparent in Table 1. It highlights the purpose of the orator to link religious history with the contemporary world.

The analysis of the third layer (Fig. 1) of the adopted model which is concerned with the extra-linguistic variables highlighted the more casual and spontaneous nature of this spoken oratory. Its tone was personal in the same way that we communicate with friends and family. The language is informal but polite with lots of colloquial words, contractions, and first-person pronouns such as I and You. This institutional frame

helped the orator to create a relaxed and friendly context and establish solidarity with the audience. It also allowed him to disclose his sentiments and emotions, make a free flow of information, remove mental distance and increase mutual trust.

Table 1: Main Discourse Topic and Sub-topics on Mystical Tranquility

1. Arts	Tranquility as the source of artistry, beauty, and artistic works
2. Medicine	Organ transplant, kidney, heart but not head
3. Ethics	Tranquility as the source of ethics, no lie, no sin, no unlawful activity
4. Literature	A verse assuming the non-existence of tranquility as the source of sins
5. Civil engineering	How to Build mosques to provide more tranquility for prayers
6. Music	The relationship between religion and music
7. Psychology	The relationship between stress, technology, and new problems, tranquility in the holy shrine
8. Politics	The killing of people in Gaza and Bosnia
9. History	Ashura, Attack on Medina

Regarding the socio-political and history, the investigation revealed that this oratory entitled Mystical Tranquility was given by Alireza Panahian in a religious group called Belovers of Hazrat Zahra, held in Tehran on the first ten days of Muharram in 2008. This topic was discussed during ten sessions the first of which was critically analyzed for this study. Thus, the immediate audience of the speech is young Iranian Shiah Muslims. Most relevant here is that the speech was given in a socio-political context that has witnessed the killing of lots of Muslims in Gaza and Bosnia.

The third step of the analysis which included the discourse strategies and the first layer of the taxonomy revealed the most striking results. The nomination discourse strategy refers to the devices such as synecdoche, metonymy, metaphor, deictic and phoric expressions, and collectives that establish membership and construct in-groups and out-groups, discourse objects, processes, and actions (Wodak, 2001). The most important social actors, the objects, phenomena/ events, and actions that were discursively constructed in this sermon were shown in Table 2.

This sermon was a rich source of metaphor as one of the devices of the referential/ nomination strategy. This device considered peace as the mother without which other blessings are impossible. There were

also two similes asserting that the high-ranked servants of God got the highest positions which meant nothing except actualizing. Getting the highest ranks or actualizing of a person was simulated to the blossoming of a flower and there were assumed to be human beings who faded without blossoming or actualizing like a flower. There was also again the metaphor of considering peace as the mother of healthiness, peacefulness, memory, intelligence, understanding, insight, wisdom, art, patience, and lots of other ethical goodness in the Persian sermon.

Table 2: Nomination/Referential Strategy of Discourse About Mystical Tranquility

Social actors	God, God’s servants, prophets, Imam Ali, human beings, Evil, ethics teacher, the young, angles, Ayat Allah Borujerdi, The Sunnah, a music tutor, people, psychologist, politicians, high school students, Imam Hossein, Yazid soldiers, Imam Sajjad, Europeans, Zeinab, the oppressed people, the family of Imam Hossein, I, you, they, We, them, our, he, him, her, their, here, there, inventors, discoverers, Muslims, Imam Reza, The Prophet Mohammad
Objects, phenomena and events	Quran, blessings, value, price, source, social respect, spiritual joy, creativity, insight, nature, healthiness, intelligence, understandability, memory, beauty, art, patience, faith, hurry, energy, sin, cognition, kindness, holy shrine, intuition, Muharram, Ashura, Karbala
Processes and actions	Bestowing, appreciation, request, determination, achievement, freedom, generosity, skill, imagination, utilization, unawareness, self-actualization, aspiration, decision, understanding, lying, advantage, attention, selling, loss, necessity, feeling, interference, praying, inculcation, search, program, movement, expense, tranquility, protection, mastery, changeability, mourning, acceptance, save, virtues

The predication strategies refer to attributing features, characterizing or qualifying social actors, objects, phenomena, events, processes, and actions both positively and negatively. They utilize the devices such as stereotypical and evaluative attributions of negative and positive traits and implicit and explicit predicates as demonstrated in Table 3.

Table 3: The Predicative Strategy of Discourse About Mystical Tranquility

transcendent, divine, peace upon him, free, surprising, deep, hidden, clear, evident, lawful, unlawful, important, responsible, wonderful, execrable, relaxing, intrinsic, moral, sold, lost, finished, internal, external, invisible, experimental, unaware, very bad, unfortunate, terrible, valuable,
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At this point, we can refer to the argumentation discourse strategy which was used to justify the negative and positive attributions imposed by the predicative strategy. Different types of topoi or loci (Fig. 1) were used as

the devices of this discursive strategy to connect the argument with the conclusion and to explicate the implicit or explicit premises. This sermon was initiated with the topos of advantage implying that some blessings such as tranquility are the source of others; therefore, one should appreciate them and live so that s/he can earn those blessings more. This sermon continued with justice topos suggesting that human beings are equal in acquiring tranquility and God has not pre-determined it for them more or less, so they have equal freedom to get this blessing. After that, the topos of responsibility explained that because human beings themselves are responsible to get tranquility and they have enough control and liberty, they should act so that they can get it and not lose it generously. It was also used in the quotation of Imam Ali who believed that the death responsibility of lots of men who died so soon is on their shoulders because they should have tried to find tranquility to be able to live longer. The next one was the topos of reality inferring that if reality is lack of tranquility, there will be no creativity, no insight, and no self-actualization. It also entailed that calmness is the source of healthiness, wisdom, understanding, art, patience, and faith; therefore, human beings should perform specific actions to get it. In addition, it also proposed that the actualization of nature resulted in that of human beings' inner deep requests. It explained how persons of different religions feel tranquility in the holy shrine of Imam Reza similarly. This topos demonstrated if human beings find tranquility really, they can feel the angels coming to the earth. It is interesting to note that the religious orders were illustrated through law/ right topos repeatedly in this sermon. It indicated that lawful (such as praying) and unlawful things are prescribed or forbidden in the religions because they all aim to encourage human beings to perform or omit activities that cause or violate tranquility. The orator suggested finding tranquility as the most important aim of religious places such as mosques. The definition topos was used to describe the highest ranks of God's saints just as self-actualization. This topos was also applied to clarify different types of quietness the worst one of which is because of unawareness. The orator benefited from this device of argumentation discourse strategy to condemn indifference toward the killing of oppressed people all over the world. The burden

topos was employed to entail that human beings are burdened by the wrong decisions, stress, or lots of other misfortunes, so they should act to weigh down their problems. The most pervasive and dominant device of the argument of this orator was the history topos applied in great overlap with the political topics to describe how history teaches life in indifference results in restlessness, so human beings should be aware of what is happening in the contemporary world and react against the killings all over the world.

Reporting, narrating, quoting, and describing utterances and events helped the speakers position their points of view, express their idea, and frame and represent discourse. This is called the perspectivization discourse strategy. The framing of the Persian sermon was obvious in the description of various blessings, and their comparison with the tranquility blessing, an elaboration on its meaning and importance. There was a quotation from Imam Ali on the necessity of tranquility in life to the extent that its absence results in early death. This was also an extended narration of Karbala events, Ashura Day, dialogues of Imam Hossein and his sister, Zeinab, and a quotation of Imam Sajjad to enable the orator to account for different types of tranquility and the necessity of sensitivity to surrounding world events. The orator reported or described the events of Medina after the martyrdom of Imam Hossein to remind the hearers of the unawareness and indifference consequences. This speech was organized in most present and somehow future tenses to describe the current tendencies and the reality of human life.

The devices of the next discourse strategy are ‘modals, tag questions, subjunctives, hesitations, vague expressions, hyperboles, litotes, indirect speech acts, and verbs of saying, thinking and feeling’ (Wodak, 2001, p. 93). Mitigation/intensification as the fifth discourse strategy ‘modifying the epistemic status of a proposition’ (Wodak, 2002, p.73) was marked in its intensification side with the great frequency of should, must, will, always, and really. There were no diminutives, hesitation or vague elements. The existence of hyperboles was visible in the description of Ashura. There are also lots of questions answered by the orator himself.

Last but not the least, the linguistic means of these texts including types and tokens should be investigated. According to Linguistics Fo-

rum, type refers to the actual items themselves, for example, -ed or -ing and token are the actual usage of these forms in a corpus, that is, the use of the past tense form in the words such as worked or playing. Simple present tense and imperative sentences distance sermons from probabilities and uncertainties. The greatest frequency of simple present tense showed the importance of expressing general truth, repeated actions or unchanging situations, and giving instructions or directions in the sermons. The use of imperatives showed the preference of the orator to give instructions and express commands or requests in the sermons.

5. Conclusion and Implication

This study set out to investigate a Persian sermon from the critical discourse analysis perspective based on the DHA of Wodak (2001). The topic analysis results showed the intertextuality and different genres on which this sermon was generally based. The findings indicated the dominance of nomination/ referential discourse strategy necessitating the use of context to interpret the religious text. The study of argumentation strategies demonstrated the use of different topoi, namely, reality, law and definition, burden, and responsibility. Description of Imam Hossein's martyrdom, the narration of Medina story after Ashura, quotations of Imam Ali and Imam Sajjad, and the use of imperative and simple present tense were the most obvious tools regarding the perspectivization and intensification and linguistic means to strengthen the orator in persuasion. Although the scope of the current study was limited, it can add to a growing body of literature in the critical discourse analysis helping the Persian religious-major learners of English to develop insights into critical language awareness and to help them act as professionals, teach them how to write, talk or interpret others, and equip them with the capabilities and understandings which are pre-conditions to become international orators.

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