

Theoretical Approach “Religious Interpreting as Performance”

African-American religious interpreting is one of the most complicated interpreting venues for skilled interpreters. To be effective, interpreters in this arena must first know cultural norms and understand the African American church aesthetic. Second, the interpreter must be able to navigate and negotiate mediated meanings and context-specific language. Third, the interpreter must be able to handle African-American gospel music. Many interpreters find such an experience daunting, and rightfully so. This article proposes a theoretical approach to the third aspect of interpreting in the black church: interpreting African-American gospel music.

African-American gospel music is composed of cultural aesthetic elements that are essential to the African-American church experience. In order to create equivalent, effective translations of gospel music *consistently*, the interpreter must know and understand these aesthetic elements. In particular, the element of performance is key in both the black church and the make up of gospel music.

In the field of interpretation, there are no theoretical approaches or models that include performance and music as essential parts of an equivalent translation. Currently, most theories of interpretation are text-centered. Such a limitation poses a problem for the religious interpreter in the African-American church. Both the source language (gospel music) and the context (the black church) require performance. Yet, without a theoretical approach or model that includes the interpretation of music and text (lyrics) simultaneously, an equivalent message cannot be achieved. Effective and equivalent translations of African-American gospel music require the interpretation of both music and text. Performance theory provides the necessary framework needed to render an equivalent translation of gospel music.

Performance Theory

A performance is a bounded event within a given framework (context), and that event is appreciated (or not) by an audience/auditor. Richard Bauman, in his seminal work *Verbal Art as Performance*, puts forth an outline for understanding performance theory as it relates to speaking events. He discusses the need for a review of theories that regard verbal art merely as “text-centered” (Bauman, 1975). He suggests that such a view places “constraints on the development of a meaningful method for understanding verbal art as performance.” To remove these theoretical constraints, Bauman proposes the following:

...[I]n artistic performance...there is something going on in the communicative interchange which says to the auditor, ‘interpret what I say in some special sense; do not take it to mean what the words alone, taken literally, would convey.’ This may lead to the further suggestion that performance sets up...an interpretive frame within which the messages being communicated are to be understood.... (1975:11)

Bauman contends that artistic performance creates a context for special communicative interchanges between an audience and performer. Those interchanges include guidelines for understanding the communication taking place. The performer “assumes accountability to an audience for the way in which communication is carried out...” (11) The audience evaluates that communication/performance for “the way it is done, for the relative skill and *effectiveness* of the performer’s display of competence.” (emphasis mine). Performance “is available for the enhancement of experience...” (11)

In the field of translation, theories and models regard interpretation as text-centered or word-centered. As such, they limit the development of a meaningful framework for understanding religious interpreting as performance. Thus, music is not included as a part of the translation process of rendering an equivalent message. *Applying the above definition of performance to African-American gospel music interpreting, we find that black gospel music expressed in the African-American church is necessarily performance.*

The African American Church

The African-American Church is performance-centered and therefore the ideal place to understand interpreting as performance, particularly as it relates to interpreting religious (gospel) music. From dancing to singing, the emotive physical expression of contentment, excitement, and joy connotes a cultural appreciation for performance. Although its focus is ministry, the black church values vocal gymnastics (e.g., melismas—also known as ‘runs’—bends, moans, guttural sounds) and original oratory (e.g., plays on words, subtle meanings, and witty rhetorical feats). With this in mind, the interpreted message must be *equivalent*. Furthermore, the requirement of audience participation (call and response) necessitates the interpreted message be *effective*.

As an event, the black church is a created space that tells the auditor-congregant to interpret what is happening in a special sense. This event is also bounded by a change in communication mode. Outside the church, the overarching cultural language is low-context, which is to say that a given message is communicated explicitly. Speech and time concepts are understood linearly. Words are viewed as denotative versus connotative.

However, in the frame of the African-American church service, the prevailing mode of communication is high-context language. This means that the spirit of the message is largely implied. Appreciation for meanings and expressiveness are more highly valued. The sub-text is chief. Phrases like “God will make a way outta no way!” or “I been running for Jesus a long time, and I ain’t tired yet” are examples of high-context language. These statements are not literal. Rather, they reference a shared experience and history among African-Americans. The words themselves are not the focus; rather, what they point to. Moreover, applicability of these phrases is to each his/her own experience.

Gospel music, by default, is high-context language. The lyrics are generally the same phrases that are used in sermons and church rhetoric. They require reading-between-the-lines interpreting. The interpreter must first understand this special meaning so that the auditor (Deaf congregant) may receive the equivalent message, and be able to participate fully.

Practical Application

To render a translation that is *effective and equivalent*, interpreting gospel songs requires analysis of both music and lyrics. Consider an excerpt from the contemporary gospel song, *Let Everything That Hath Breath (Praise the Lord)*. The lead vocalist, Dr. Judith McAllister, is the praise and worship leader at a large predominately African American Pentecostal church in Los Angeles, CA. In the beginning of the song she alternately speaks and reads a passage from the Bible. Eventually she joins in singing with the choir.

[DR. MCALLISTER (reading)]

“PRAISE THE LORD OH MY SOUL. WHILE I LIVE WILL I GIVE YOU
GLORY AND HONOR. WHILE I HAVE MY BEING...”

[Choir joins in singing while DR. MCALLISTER continues reading]

Everybody praise Him! PRAISE GOD IN HIS SANCTUARY. *Everybody praise Him!* PRAISE HIM IN THE FIRMAMENT OF HIS POWER. *Everybody praise Him!* FOR HIS MIGHTY ACTS...*Everybody praise Him!* FOR HIS EXCELLENT GREATNESS...*Everybody praise Him!* WITH THE SOUND OF TRUMPET...*Everybody praise Him!* WITH THE PSALTERY AND HARP... *Everybody praise Him!* WITH THE TIMBREL AND DANCE...*Everybody praise Him!* WITH THE STRINGED INSTRUMENTS AND ORGANS...*Everybody praise Him!* UPON THE LOUD CYMBALS...*Everybody praise Him!* UPON THE HIGH SOUNDING CYMBALS. LET EVERYTHING (!!!) THAT HAS BREATH PRAISE HIM!

[Altos 6 times]

Give Him the highest Praise...The highest Praise

[Tenors 2 times]

Hallelujah! Sing Hallelujah!

[DR. MCALLISTER (singing with Choir)]

EVERYBODY PRAISE HIM. *Everybody praise Him!* EVERYBODY PRAISE HIM. *Everybody praise Him!* EVERYBODY PRAISE HIM. *Everybody praise Him!* EVERYBODY LIFT THE SAVIOR... *Everybody lift the Savior up!...*

CLAP YO' HANDS... *Everybody praise Him!* AND PRAISE HIM...
STOMP YO' FEET... *Everybody praise Him!* AND PRAISE HIM...

HE'S WORTHY (...sung lively, with great conviction)...*Everybody praise Him!*
YES HE IS...*Everybody praise Him!*
HE'S WORTHY...*Everybody praise Him!*
LET'S LIFT THE SAVIOR...*Everybody lift the Savior up!*

As the volume and pace crescendo, Dr. McAllister begins exhorting the choir and audience with greater passion. The song's climaxing intensity all but force audience members to follow the instructions. In the beginning, the choir simply admonishes the audience to praise God. This gentle nudging is manifested in their slight body movements and restrained facial expressions. To the auditors, the music's tempo suggests that finger snapping and moderate side-to-side rocking is appropriate. Passion and excitement are unmistakably building as repetition of shared meaningful phrases couple with periodic melismas. Half way through the song, there is an evident shift in tone and mood. The audience heeds the clarion call discerning it is their turn to express religious sentiment with appreciated freedom. The interpreter must not stand in the midst of the event detached: the text book definition of interpretation will not suffice. The interpreter must stomp her feet. S/he must perform!

Dr. McAllister soon orders everyone ("*C'mon everybody*") to clap their hands. How must this charge be conveyed visually? The interpreter must move rhythmically demonstrating that the source is a song and not discourse. She must express with no doubt that Dr. McAllister is yelling. The Deaf congregant cannot hear the guttural sounds and exaggerated phrasing signaling the song's approaching climax. The interpreter's body, hands, face and feet must summon the Deaf auditor's inclusion and response. To do the aforementioned means to render an equivalent and effective translation.

Works Cited

Bauman, R. (1977). *Verbal art as performance*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House Publishers.

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The authors will present this topic in greater detail at the NAOBI, Inc., Annual Conference 2005, in Long Beach, CA. To this end, a formal research project is in progress to determine how religious interpreters consistently produce effective and equivalent interpretations of religious music. Interpreters, religious interpreters in particular, are invited to participate by filling out a brief questionnaire. The online form may be accessed at www.RenaissanceOneCo.com/signlanguages.html.